DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 607 CS 209 440

AUTHOR Sedgwick, Ellery
TITLE Using Expressive Writing to Teach the Reading of Literature.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (74th, Detroit, MI, November 16-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; Reading Comprehension; *Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Expressive Writing

ABSTRACT

Traditional methods of studying literature have included making assignments, having class discussions of the texts, and then assigning students to write about them. However, based on the concept that reading literature is a form of composing and that aspects of the process model for teaching writing can be applied to teaching literature, the inclusion of expressive/speculative writing could be a method of allowing students to invent, develop, and revise their responses to literary texts in the process of reading. This would simply require strategic intervention on the part of the teacher during the students' reading, to provide feedback and encouragement. Among the benefits of such an approach are that it would give students practice in applying strategies for reading literature and allow teachers to identify causes of poor reading. Basic strategies for encouraging students to use expressive writing include writing in response to a prepared or doctored text, writing in response to works read aloud in class, and writing in response to works read outside the classroom. Expressing their responses in writing will help students to become more effective in formulating their own interpretations as they read literature. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED263607

USING EXPRESSIVE WRITING TO TEACH THE READING OF LITERATURE

Ellery Sedgwick

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ellery Sedgwick

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209440

Ellery Sedgwick
Longwood College

USING EXPRESSIVE WRITING TO TEACH THE READING OF LITERATURE

Most of us who teach introductory literature courses agree that our primary purpose is neither to cover a great breadth of literary material nor to examine it in scholarly depth, but rather to teach students how to read and respond to literature. Though it would delight us, it is not crucial that the majority of our students who are not English majors know works by all of the great Victorian novelists or understand that "Bartleby the Scrivener" may be read as a delicious parody of Thoreauvian civil disobedience. What is crucial to us is that they develop both the ability and the confidence to read actively and respond independently to literary texts. Further, we intuitively endorse the distinction defined by Louise Rosenblatt and others between reading to extract information and the aesthetic reading of literature in which the experience of responding to and participating in the text is itself the chief purpose. We generally try to teach the latter.

Most of us agree, then, that our main aim in introductory literature courses is to teach not the content of particular works but the process of reading and responding to literary texts. We need to continually question, however, how well our methods are adapted to this aim. In my experience, the traditional method in these courses is to assign poems, stories or novels and only then, after students have finished reading, to have them discuss the texts and write on them. Both discussion and writing focus primarily on the interpretive results of reading and not on the process of interacting with the text. The effect is frequently that students read without really articulating their own questions and responses, waiting to be enlightened in class. What they learn in class, however, is an interpretation (often either the instructor's or a classmate's) of the particular

work, developed through the instructor's questions and abstracted from the student's experience of the text itself.

The formal essay of literary criticism which is the standard writing assignment in introductory literature classes seems to me also to lead the student towards developing a single generalization about the work retrospectively abstracted from the text, rather than developing speculative intellectual and emotional responses to the text or interpretive strategies that can be applied to other texts. Instructors are often disappointed that these essays contain little substantiation from or response to the text itself, but perhaps this is partly inherent in writing assignments that begin only after the student has finished really reading the text.

This critique of retrospective class discussions and writing assignments abstracted from the student's experience of the literary text itself is, of course, neither new nor fully accurate. Most instructors in introductory literature courses, especially those of us who were weaned on the New Criticism, focus class discussion on the text itself and seek to guide students to develop their own interpretations. But even if we escape the pitfalls of explicating our own interpretation, it is primarily we who ask the questions, and those questions are asked after students have read. We have few methods for teaching students how to develop and apply their own reading strategies while they are reading. I believe, then, that a strong case can be made that the teaching of literature (and particularly the writing assignments) is predominantly product rather than process oriented.

A comparison with the teaching of writing seems inevitable. The traditional paradigm for teaching writing emphasized discussing models, asking students to imitate them, evaluating their finished products, and finally telling them to apply our critical comments to their next effort. In contrast, the new paradigm

emphasizes identifying recursive mental activities involved in writing effectively, offering students strategies for developing and practicing these activities, and intervening at strategic points in the process itself, particularly during invention and revision, to provide feedback and encourage students to enrich that process.

As in the traditional paradigm for teaching writing, so in teaching literature we tend to emphasize retrospective discussions, to teach after the fact rather than intervening directly at strategic points in the process. We give models of interpretation and supply abstract concepts like genre or point of view that students are to apply to their future reading. But we often do not identify for students the major activities involved in responsive and critical reading; we do not encourage them to slow down and enrich their process of reading with "invention" and "revision"; we often do not require them actively and independently to practice applying reading strategies; and we seldom provide feedback that they can apply to the text that they are in the process of reading.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that reading literature is, in fact, a form of composing and that aspects of the process model for teaching writing can be fruitfully applied to teaching the reading of literature. More specifically, I propose that students be encouraged to use expressive/speculative writing as a means of inventing, developing, and revising their responses to literary texts in the process of their reading. This technique involves deliberate strategic intervention in the process of reading itself to allow the student to compose or articulate her responses in writing: to formulate questions, to speculate on connections and implications, to project likely patterns of development and to revise previous predictions. Abundant justification for viewing reading as a process of composing and for using expressive/speculative writing to enhance the process can be drawn from recent research in the

psycholinguistics of reading and writing and from reader response literary criticism.

Research into the psycholinguistics of reading by scholars like Russell Stauffer, Frank Smith, and Robert DeBeaugrand demonstrates that reading is not simply a passive decoding of alphabetical, semantic, or syntactic signals in order to reveal the propositions encoded by the author. Rather, reading is a process in which the reader must be a constantly active participant in composing meaning. Kenneth Goodman summarizes the new paradigm of the reading process as follows: "Readers use language to obtain meaning. Through seeking to comprehend the writer's meaning, they in fact construct the meaning through a process that is strongly dependent on their own experience and conceptual development. What message the reader produces is partly dependent on what the writer intended, but always very much dependent on what the reader brings to the particular text."[1]

Robert DeBeaugrand writes that reading is fundamentally a "connectivity search" in which the reader must infer relationships between letters, between words, between propositions in the text and between these propositions and her own previous concepts of the world.[2] DeBeaugrand further notes that "the duration, intensity, and thoroughness of this search [for connections] are always dependent on the readers' demands and motivation, and the relevance of the text to current goals."[3] Similarly, Stauffer emphasizes that the depth of comprehension depends largely on the clarity and immediacy of the purpose for reading.[4] Certainly, expressive/speculative writing that requires students to articulate immediate written responses to the text can be used to focus the students' purposes for reading and to motivate a more active "connectivity search" than they might undertake with vaguer, more distant goals.

In fact, the proposition that immediately verbalizing inferences from one's reading enhances depth of processing and thereby increases retention has been substantiated in a study cited by DeBeaugrand. Janet Michler-Lackman conducted an experiment in which she asked subjects to respond to sentences they read in one of three ways: first, to judge whether or not the sentence was semantically meaningful; second, to judge whether or not it followed from the previous sentence; and third, to produce a sentence that might logically follow from it--in other words, to articulate an inference.[5] After each type of response, subjects were tested for their recall of the meaning of the sentence.

Michler-Lackman came to three conclusions: first, that retention depends on the original depth of processing; second, that readers process material in greater depth if they work consciously at connecting it with what comes before and after; and third, that the greatest depth of processing occurred when readers were asked to produce an articulate inference from what they read. These conclusions strongly affirm the value of asking students to jot down inferences, responses and connections during the course of their reading.

Like Stauffer, Smith, and DeBeaugrand, reader response literary critics like Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser demonstrate that the reader, and particularly the reader of literature, must participate actively in constructing the meaning of a text. This participation, Iser suggests, must be much more active in reading literature than in reading expository forms because while didactic writing generally attempts to define, then fulfill the reader's expectations, good literature constantly requires the reader to reassess and modify her expectations. (The lowest literary forms, Iser says, are those, like formulaic romances, in which the development is most predictable.) For Iser, then, reading literature well requires constantly speculating on multiple potential

patterns of development in plot, character and theme, and modifying initial patterns of expectation to incorporate new information.

The psycholinguists and the reader response critics agree, then, that reading, especially reading literature, is not a process of decoding unambiguous signals or of following a single thread of meaning laid down by the author to lead readers to a single interpretive idea. Rather, reading literature is a complex process with recursive stages, the goal of which is to compose meaning. First, the reader establishes a purpose for reading and defines the problems to be solved. Second, the reader infers connections between units of meaning within the text itself and between these and her own experience. Third, from these connections she constructs hypothetical solutions to the problems she has posed and projects expected lines of development. Fourth, she measures her expectations against the text and constantly revises them to make them more accurate, more inclusive, more articulate.

This description of reading brings us back to the idea that reading is a form of composing especially similar to the initial stages of written composition. Like writers, readers have to pose the right problems or questions; generate connections between disparate pieces of information; relate new information to their established concepts; organize interpretive hypotheses; test these hypotheses; and finally revise them.

If we agree with this view of reading as a process of composing meaning, and if we feel that our students often do not compose actively and effectively, we need to look for methods that directly help students to develop and enrich their composing processes. To return to the comparison with teaching writing, we need not only to discuss and evaluate the products of their composing, but also to encourage students to become conscious of the process itself, to slow it down and enrich it with recursive invention and revision, and to practice

specific strategies for asking the right questions, constructing plausible hypotheses, and modifying them fluently.

Certainly, pedagogical strategies for teaching the process of reading literature exist and have been widely used for a long time. Many of these, as I mentioned, are the legacy of the New Criticism, although these strategies tend to focus on the text itself rather than on the reader's response. As far back as the mid-thirties, however, Louise Rosenblatt has advocated a pedagogy directly based on the student's responses, and she is now joined by David Blei ch and others.[6] Russell Stauffer's process oriented "directed reading-thinking activities" have been used by elementary school teachers for more than a decade. And more recently, articles like Russell Hunt's "Toward a Process-Intervention Model in Literature Teaching" have begun to appear in journals for college teachers.[7]

The only supplement that I am proposing to methods already widely practiced is the systematic use of informal expressive/speculative writing while the student is in the process of reading a text and immediately after. This use of speculative writing in the process of reading is, reversing the old adage, something that many teachers have for a long time practiced themselves but few preach to their students. Many of us know the value not just of "reading notes," but of brief speculative scribblings in page margins or fly leaves that help us to articulate our immediate responses and later to develop and organize lesson plans or papers on these works. Knowing the value of expressive writing ourselves, we should instruct our students to respond to their readings as John Adams instructed his grandsons to respond to their travels. "I wish you to have each," he wrote, "a Pencil Book always in your Pocket by which you minute on the Spot any remarkable thing you may see or hear... .Without a minute Diary, your Travels will be no better than the flights of Birds through the air. They will leave no trace

behind them."[8]

By expressive/speculative writing, I mean writing for which the writer herself is the primary audience and for which the primary purpose is to articulate and explore her responses. I mean writing used to translate new ideas into the writer's own language, to integrate new concepts with her own experience, to establish connections, draw inferences, and construct speculative hypotheses. I use James Britton's term "expressive" to designate writing that verbalizes our immediate consciousness. But much of the work based on Britton's idea seems to me to emphasize affective at the expense of cognitive response. I add the term "speculative" to redress the balance and to suggest that this type of writing can incorporate both emotional and intellectual responses, both immediate personal reactions and reflections on their implications.

The use of expressive/speculative writing in the process of reading has a number of pedagogical benefits. First, it motivates students to respond more actively to their reading and to process it in greater depth and with better recall. Several studies, such as Michler-Lackman's, demonstrate that retention is dependent on the original depth of processing and that students process their reading more deeply if they are asked to verbalize inferences directly from it.[9] Second, the use of expressive/speculative writing gives students considerable practice in developing and independently applying strategies for reading literature. The instructor's directions for this kind of writing assignment can lead students to formulate their own reading questions, to notice and speculate on certain patterns in the text, and to articulate and test inferences. Third, this writing done in the process of reading would serve as "invention" material for later class discussions and formal expository essays. A record of initial responses and speculations on a text would make it considerably easier for students to develop credible generalizations in these essays and would

give those generalizations greater depth and specificity.

The use of expressive/speculative writing has a fourth benefit for teachers of literature: diagnosing the causes of poor reading. Expressive/speculative writing can be used to diagnose the kinds of questions the students themselves are asking of the texts as they read and to examine the evolution of their answers to these questions, thereby making it easier to pinpoint the sources of misreadings.

I can think of three basic strategies for getting students to use expressive/speculative writing during the process of reading. The first involves writing in response to a prepared or doctored text; the second involves writing in response to works read aloud in class; and the third involves writing in response to works read outside the classroom.

Russell Hunt, in his excellent article in College English titled "Toward a Process-Intervention Method of Teaching Literature," suggests several strategies for using prepared texts. The most familiar of these resembles the Cloze reading test. Students are given a prepared text, generally a poem, in which key words are omitted and are asked to project and justify possible completions. The primary purpose is not to project the original word, but to give students instruction and practice in making predictions by observing patterns of word connotation, imagery, and meter.

As a variation on this Cloze technique, instructors might omit phrases, lines or whole portions of poems and stories, asking students to supply the omissions and to justify their projections in writing. What predictions would students make, for instance, if the last line of "Richard Cory" or the couplet of a Shakespeare sonnet were omitted? How would they finish "The Cask of Amontillado"? And most importantly, why? What textual evidences can they cite as justification for their projections?

The second group of methods for using expressive writing during the reading process involves students and instructors reading works aloud in class. The reader breaks off at strategic points to allow students to write responses articulating patterns observed, formulating questions and projecting expectations. These methods have the additional benefit of allowing students to read poetry and fiction aloud and to hear it read more than they often do in classes dominated by lecture and discussion.

Since I believe that at least the initial reading of poems should generally be uninterrupted, my usual tactic with poetry is first to have the work read whole, then reread by stanzas with writing and brief discussion to compare responses in the intervals.

Questions to direct students' writing can be as general as "What is your reaction to the speaker here?" or as specific as "Choose two words to characterize the speaker's tone of voice and cite several connotative words from the text to support your characterization." Questions may usefully be posed either before or after the relevant part of the text has been read. Posing questions before obviously focuses, but also necessarily restricts students' attention. Posing questions afterwards leaves each student freer to respond with her own observations. Each method seems to me to have its use.

The number of pauses for writing and discussion can, of course, be varied also. The advantage of using writing this way is that it requires active reading and reflection from each student. The disadvantage is that it takes up considerable class time. It is not necessary, however, to apply the writing method to a whole text, even with poetry. Often, a thorough reflection on the first portion of a text will make the rest of the text much more accessible to the student. I find, for instance, that many students founder in attempting

to grasp the dramatic context generally inferred but not stated in lyric poems. If I read the initial portions of the poem, ask them to write on questions defining the dramatic context and allow some consensus on this context to develop in class discussion, students often gain the orientation and confidence they need to respond effectively to the rest of the poem.

I have found this same method--orienting students in a text by asking them to write on and discuss initial portions--effective in teaching short stories and novels as well as poetry. The instructor or students can read key opening passages of a text in class, then write on them and discuss them in preparation for reading the remainder as homework. As a thorough grasp of dramatic situation is often a prerequisite for understanding lyrics, so a grasp of the narrative persona or the themes implied by initial descriptions of character or environment is often prerequisite to effective reading of narrative fiction. The student who has consciously observed these elements and articulated hypotheses about them has already begun an active "connectivity search" and will be able to project and follow important patterns of development.

The third group of techniques mentioned above for integrating expressive/speculative writing into the process of reading involves asking students to write at designated intervals in their own reading. These writings may involve simply noting important details to be reflected on later, or they may involve responding to questions guiding students through a systematic sequence of observations about a text.

If we are to encourage students to articulate their impressions and observations in writing while in the process of reading, our first task will be to undo years of training and encourage them to make a habit of scribbling in the text itself. In high school, where most of their books are school property,

they have been habituated to thinking of writing in texts as vandalism. In college, where most texts are their own, they believe, often erroneously, that writing in texts will diminish their resale value. To supercede these habits, I try to instill my own belief that a reader cannot give a text a serious reading without carrying on an active dialogue with the text at least partly verbalizing in written notations. Clean pages of a text generally reflect superficial reading.

Perhaps the simplest type of responsive marking students should do to make response habitual is to compile, either by writing or underlining, running lists--for instance, lists of metaphors, of certain recurrent images, or of references to a theme. This sharpens observation, calls attention to patterns, and encourages active development of hypotheses. After reading, the students review these lists and write generalizations based on their specific observations.

I have found another, more extensive form of notation very useful in teaching students a process of reading literature. This method involves asking students to keep a running log of the questions that the text raises in their minds. In its discussion of teaching students to become responsive readers of literature, the College Entrance Examination Board report Freedom and Discipline in English states: "Question asking is the process the students must learn, becoming critics themselves as they become increasingly adept at asking their own questions and seeking and testing their answers."[10]

Asking students to articulate in writing the succession of questions raised during their reading of a text serves several functions. First, it is a means of diagnosing the kinds of concerns students actually have in their reading. In the traditional approach to teaching literature, the teacher generally asks the questions on which discussion and writing are based and

therefore often has little idea of the questions that the students themselves are asking while they read. Second, asking students to jot questions as they read habituates them to engaged, focused and responsive reading. Third, these questions can be used to generate good class discussions and can serve as problems, defined by the students themselves, to be addressed in formal writing assignments.

A natural extension of the question log assignment is to ask students to write speculative answers to some of their own questions. One way of doing this is to ask them to record questions, then break off their reading to write again when they first feel they can predict the answer to a question. At this writing, they should briefly explain their prediction and note the evidence that leads them to project it. They then resume reading, consciously matching their written predictions against the text.

In discussing these predictions, the instructor should recognize that in most cases a range of predictions rather than simply the ones realized in the text can be plausible and well founded. Recognition of this fact can lead to interesting discussions of the differences between realistic and formulaic fiction.

Besides stimulating students to read more actively, the written protocols can serve a variety of other purposes. Predictions written in the course of reading stories like "The Most Dangerous Game" can be used effectively to dramatize conventional foreshadowing and the serial ordeal plot. Predictions in the course of reading other stories like "The Lottery" can stimulate discussion of the unreliable narrator who intentionally misleads or withholds information from the reader. Finally, these written protocols can dramatize the differences between a first and second reading of a text or between projecting forward and interpreting retrospectively after crucial new information has been revealed.

Perhaps the most fertile opportunity for using expressive/speculative writing to develop students' ability to read literature is in teaching longer

works, particularly novels. Novels are frequently assigned in sections and discussed while students are still in the process of reading. Concurrent reading-journal entries in which students articulate questions and responses to their reading and speculate on possible lines of development enrich both their subsequent reading and class discussions.

Several of the teaching strategies mentioned above can be usefully applied to novels. But I would like to elaborate on one possibility particular to the novel. A colleague of mine, Michael Lund, is a Victorian scholar interested in resurrecting in the classroom the long Victorian serial novel. Both to avoid the strain of taking a class through an 800-page novel in a few days and to recreate more nearly the Victorian readers' experience of these novels, Dr. Lund each semester assigns his students at least one long novel in the original installments over a fifteen-week period. Reading novels this way, he posits, provides far greater opportunity for reflection and for the interconnection of the reader's own life experiences. with her experience of the text than if the work were read and discussed in a few days. Obviously, Dr. Lund's method also provides an ideal opportunity for readers to write on and discuss their responses, to raise questions, project hypotheses and test them in the process of reading the text rather than simply retrospectively.

Opportunities and strategies for having students write in direct response to their reading of literary texts are numerous, as are reasons for doing so. First, asking students to write as they read stimulates every student to respond actively and begin articulating her responses to a text independently before hearing what the instructor or classmates say it means. Second, it encourages every student to undertake a more active "connectivity search" within the text and between the text and her own experience. Third, it insures that every student has reflected on her reading and generated observation to be used in class discussions and formal papers. Finally, it gives every student guided practice in the process of reading itself:

in posing significant questions of the text and in constantly composing, testing, and revising possible answers. In sum, composing their responses in expressive/speculative writing helps students to become more effective and independent composers of meaning as they read literature.

FOOTNOTES

1 Kenneth Goodman, "What Do We Know About Reading?," in Findings of Research in Miscue Analysis: Classroom Implications, ed. P.D. Allen and Dorothy Watson (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE/ERIC, 1976), p. 58.

2 Robert DeBeaugrand, "Design Criteria for Process Models of Reading," Reading Research Quarterly, 16 (1981), 286.

3 DeBeaugrand, p. 286.

4 Russell Stauffer, Directing Reading Maturity as a Cognitive Process (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 26.

5 Janet Michler-Lackman, "Depth of Comprehension and Sentence Memory," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 13 (1974), 98-106.

6 See Louise Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938) and The Reader, the Text, the Poem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978). Also, David Bleich, Subjective Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

7 Russell A. Hunt, "Toward a Process-Intervention Model in Literature Teaching," College English, 44 (1982), 345-357.

8 John Adams quoted in L. H. Butterfield, "Whatever You Write Preserve," American Heritage, 10 (1959), 31.

9 See also Frank Friedman and John Richards, "Effect of Level, Review and Sequence of Inserted Questions on Text Processing," Journal of Educational Psychology, 73 (1981), 427-436.

10 College Entrance Examination Board Commission on English, Freedom and Discipline in English (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1965), p. 55.